

The Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education and the Challenges of International Teacher Solidarity

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Biography

Paul Bocking recently completed his PhD in geography at York University. His dissertation studied the impact of neoliberal education policy on the professional autonomy of teachers in Mexico City, New York and Toronto. He is currently a sessional lecturer in labor studies at McMaster University. He also works as an occasional teacher with the Toronto District School Board, and is vice president of the Toronto Occasional Teachers' Bargaining Unit of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF). Since 2010, he has participated on behalf of OSSTF in the Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education.

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Abstract

The ascendance of economic globalization, epitomized for the United States, Canada and Mexico by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has been paralleled by the increasingly transnational scale of education policy. While national and regional governments remain the employers of public school teachers, the policies articulated by supranational institutions including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are ever more influential. Teacher internationalism has become increasingly significant for its capacity to both articulate shared analyses of the predominantly neoliberal character of global education policy, and to coordinate cross border solidarity. The Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education emerged in the context of the end of Cold War labor politics, and the signing of NAFTA in 1994. It has become an enduring network of established and dissident teachers' unions and movements in Mexico, Canada and the US. This article assesses how the Trinational has confronted critical issues for labor internationalism. These include navigating national and international union tensions, facilitating grassroots cross border radical unionist networks, horizontal power relations in North-South alliances, moving beyond rhetorical declarations to practical action, and the long term sustainability of international solidarity.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a significant growth in solidarity between teachers' unions and movements across North America (Weiner & Compton 2008; Roman & Arregui

2015). Much of this can be attributed to an increasing awareness of the similarities of struggles faced by teachers across jurisdictions and borders (Bocking 2017; Bascia & Stevenson 2017). National and regional governments remain the primary forces defining the structures of education and teachers' employment. However union leaders and activists are recognizing the increasingly transnational influence of neoliberal policy networks (Peck & Theodore 2015; Ball & Junemann 2012), especially multilateral agencies like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Local exceptionalism and parochialism is giving way to an understanding that there are dominant forms of education governance sharing strong similarities from place to place (Sahlberg 2011). As a result, the impetus for solidarity has grown from a moral imperative of supporting workers in hardship, to recognizing the usefulness of sharing strategies for confronting similar policies whether of high stakes standardized exams or privatization (Bascia & Stevenson 2017).

The Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education emerged in the 1990s, led by teacher unionists and academics from Mexico, the United States and Canada who shared concerns for the potential of the North American Free Trade Agreement to facilitate the privatization of public education in all three countries. As a result, it is more embedded in the grassroots and presents a more radical challenge to the neoliberal education agenda than previously established international union networks (Arriaga Lemus 2008; Potter 2016). The Trinational has acted first to articulate a shared strategic analysis of key aspects of the global neoliberalization of public education and secondly to mobilize solidarity for its member organizations in struggle with their respective governments (Kuehn 2006). The latter effort has been of particular importance for the dissident Mexican teachers' movement, the National

Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) (Arriaga Lemus 2015). Interest has also grown in increasing the coordination of struggles across borders, although this remains more difficult.

I will be critically assessing how the Trinational and its major organizational participants have represented an effort to foment a teachers' internationalism across Canada, the US and Mexico. Concepts from social movement internationalism (Featherstone 2012; Maria Antentas 2015) and labor geography (Herod 2018; Cumbers 2004) are used to analyze and understand the opportunities and enduring challenges for teacher internationalism in the North-South context. Of particular relevance here is the question of how organizations focused on “militant particularisms” (Harvey 1996) —struggles necessarily rooted in a specific place— develop meaningful, long-term identification with shared interests of faraway others. This is especially a challenge when it involves overcoming wealth, power and racial inequities, in order to create a meaningful and sustainable form of solidarity.

I begin here with a historical review of the Cold War origins of teachers' international organization in North America. I then describe the evolution of the Trinational from activism around NAFTA in the 1990s, to its analysis of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the global neoliberalization of education in the 21st Century, particularly the proliferation of standardized testing. While negotiating the political tensions of teacher internationalism that have persisted since the end of the Cold War, the Trinational has also served as an important space both for raising the profile of movements in Mexico that are the most vulnerable to state repression, and for the creation of grassroots teacher networks across North America that are inspired by their cross border colleagues. Drawing on semi-structured

interviews¹ with union leaders from Mexico, Canada and the US who have participated in the Trinational, participatory observation at biennial Trinational conferences and auto-ethnography², I then assess how the Trinational has confronted the limits of labor internationalism as it relates to teachers as public sector workers. These issues include broadening member participation, the challenge of genuinely horizontal power relations in North-South alliances, moving beyond rhetorical declarations to practical action, and the long term sustainability of international solidarity.

The Cold War Origins of Institutionalized North American Teacher Internationalism

The political realities that define local contexts also shape the characteristics of the transnational networks. Rather than a ‘flat ontology’ of equals acting across a frictionless space, the most powerful locally situated actors tend to exert an inordinate influence, defining and shaping these networks (Cumbers & Routledge 2013). Accordingly, the particular ideologies and political agendas of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) of the US have shaped teachers’ internationalism globally since 1949. Their

¹ The author thanks Anne-Marie Bresee for her work transcribing the English-language interviews cited here.

² I first became active in the Trinational Coalition when I attended its 2010 conference in Montreal, Quebec, as a member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF). I have subsequently represented OSSTF at various conferences and meetings organized by the Trinational, principally in Mexico, including at its 2018 conference in Orizaba, Veracruz, which is referenced below. While completing my PhD in geography and working as a sessional lecturer, I am also a substitute teacher in Toronto and an elected local officer of OSSTF.

influence was particularly evident during the polarized Cold War era, which coincided with the peak of the US labor movement's power domestically (Sukarieh & Tannock 2010).³

Scipes (2010) argues that imperialism defined the international activities of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) during the Cold War era from 1945 to 1991. According to Scipes (2010), a deep ideological well of nationalism and loyalty to the US state has dominated the upper ranks of US unions. Union leaders routinely worked with the US government to undermine or assist unions abroad —particularly in developing countries— that were perceived to challenge or support American geopolitical interests, usually defined in relation to the Soviet Union (Herod 2018). This activity was carried out with little transparency or input from union's rank and file, and was sometimes challenged by dissident members (Scipes 2012).

At the start of the Cold War era in 1949, the recently formed World Federation of Trades Unions suffered a decisive split. Refusing to participate alongside Communist-aligned unions, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of the US and the mainstream union federations of most other industrialized capitalist countries left to form with the American Federation of Labor, a rival International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The Cold War context of competing geopolitically aligned international labor federations was paralleled by teachers. Yet also present were divisions which often existed at the national level, especially in North America,

³ Major teachers' unions in Canada and the US were founded in the early 20th Century. Yet within these countries, as in Mexico and most of the world, the relative weakness of teachers' unions contributed to the limited extent of their international activities prior to the rapid expansion of public education in the postwar era, followed by the rise of public sector unionism. Teachers' internationalism in North America substantively emerged in the latter period.

between teachers' organizations defining themselves as trade unions or as professional associations.

Within this context, the World Organization of the Teaching Profession was founded in 1946 at the impetus of the NEA. It was restructured in 1952 into the larger World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession. Guided by the NEA, the World Confederation was structured as a professional association rather than as a union, attracting organizations like the Canadian Teachers' Federation⁴ (CTF), which also did not identify with the labor movement (Croskery 1950). The CTF subsequently conducted most of its international activities from the 1950s through the 1970s within the World Confederation. Aside from participation in international conferences, these activities consisted primarily of teacher exchanges, charity-based development assistance such as supporting the construction of schools, and research reports. The CTF's involvement with the World Confederation began to decline in 1968 when leaders from the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) elected to the World Confederation learned that 85 percent of the international organization's funding was channeled through the NEA from the Central Intelligence Agency (Kuehn 2006). The diminishment of its participation in the World Confederation did not substantially affect the form of international activities conducted by the CTF. They remained centred on North-South development work and professional growth for participating teachers, generally eschewing more overt forms of political advocacy (Bellissimo 2017; Kuehn 2006).

⁴ Unlike in the United States or Mexico, Canada's provincial governments are completely responsible for K-12 education. The federal government plays no role beyond the gathering of national data. While the Canadian Teachers' Federation was formed in 1920, its role is focused on research, professional development, and serving as the focal point for international liaisons on behalf of the provincial unions, which engage in collective bargaining with their respective governments.

Initially, the World Confederation's principal rival was the World Federation of Teachers' Unions, also founded in 1946, which was affiliated with the Communist aligned World Federation of Trade Unions (Russell 1950; Carr 1960). However, its regional affiliate for the Western Hemisphere, the Confederation of American Educators (Confederación de Educadores Americanos -CEA) was more mainstream. Most Latin American teachers' unions were affiliated, including Mexico's National Union of Education Workers (Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores de la Educación -SNTE), as well as some Francophone unions in Quebec⁵, and it had a relationship with UNESCO (Pita González 2011; Kuehn 2006). The World Confederation attempted unsuccessfully to form a centrist alternative to supplant the CEA in Latin America⁶. Affiliates to the World Confederation were generally discouraged by the international organization from working with Latin American unions, which were described as 'too political' (Kuehn 2006). Yet for Mexico's part, the official SNTE leadership hewed closely to the anti-Communism of the country's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido del Revolución Institucional -PRI) (Padilla 2013). The PRI-dominated state forcibly took control of the SNTE in 1948, five years after the union's founding, alongside most of the country's organized labor.⁷

⁵ The CEA evolved out of earlier federations of Latin American teachers' unions, the first founded in Buenos Aires in 1928 (Pita González 2011).

⁶ The CEA survived the Cold War, with institutional resources provided by the SNTE, particularly during the heyday of its leader Elba Esther Gordillo from 1989 to 2012 (Kuehn 2006; Enrique de la Garza Toledo, Interviewed Feb. 2015).

⁷ With backing from the US government, the AFL-CIO provided significant financial support in the late 1960s for housing in Mexico City built by the officially recognized Mexican Confederation of Workers for its members, to bolster the latter's prestige in the context of rising leftist dissident movements (Herod 2001, 2018).

The third major organization was the International Federation of Free Teacher Unions, founded by the AFT in 1951, in rivalry with the NEA. The International Federation was distinguished from the World Confederation by considering itself a union and affiliating to national union centres, and by being even further driven in its anti-Communism (Russell 1950; Carr 1960). Few US unions were as directly implicated in labor imperialism as the AFT. The Cold War AFT was also an extreme example of how the situated political characteristics of the dominant locale could define a larger organization. From the early 1960s to his death in 1997, Albert Shanker, president of New York City's United Federation of Teachers⁸, by far the AFT's largest local, also presided over the New York State United Teachers, the AFT itself from 1974, and the International Federation of Free Teacher Unions. Shanker was also a director of the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development. He accused US president Reagan of being soft on the Soviet Union, advocated increased military spending and supported wars and interventions from Vietnam to Nicaragua (Weiner 2012; Sukarieh & Tannock 2010).

When the International Federation merged with the World Confederation to form Education International in 1993, placing the CTF, NEA, AFT, as well as the SNTE into one organization, Shanker was its first president (Sukarieh & Tannock 2010). Policy continued to be heavily influenced by the US affiliates (Weiner 2012). The retirement of many of the AFL-CIO's Cold Warriors is attributed to the election of John Sweeney to president of the federation in 1995,

⁸ The United Federation of Teachers itself emerged out of the Communist-led New York Teachers' Union, a significant part of the city's once strong radical labor movement, destroyed in the US government's anti-Communist investigations of the 1950s (Taylor 2011).

and the restructuring of its international activities.⁹ Meanwhile, Education International has developed a sophisticated critical analysis of the common challenges facing teachers and their unions in the context of the ‘Global Education Reform Movement’ (GERM) (Bascia & Stevenson 2017). These stances are clearly opposed to the pro-privatization agenda of US president Trump’s education secretary, and highly critical of the dominant agenda of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the most important multilateral proponent of the ‘GERM’. Education International is very different from its predecessor organizations. Yet as is discussed below, Education International dismayed many activists in Mexico for publicly backing (alongside the AFT) the former leader of the SNTE from 2013 to 2018 who defended the neoliberal education reforms of his government.

The Emergence of the Trinational in the Context of the Global Neoliberalization of Education

The end of the Cold War and the thawing of geopolitics that had confined labor internationalism, coincided with the ascendance of economic globalization, facilitated by treaties including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which provided the impetus for

⁹ Particularly outside of North America, the degree to which the post Cold War international work of the AFT has been independent from US foreign policy is contested. Sukarieh and Tannock (2010) argue that Shanker’s legacy persisted within the AFT. They cite the union’s support for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its ‘democracy promotion’ in the Middle East by conducting seminars with US government funding for teachers’ union officials in Iraq during its occupation, and in Lebanon, prior to its 2006 war with Israel (the latter endorsed by the AFT). Along with espousing a conservative vision of ‘modern’ professional unionism (Stevenson 2019) that was portrayed in opposition to ‘backward’ political rights-based advocacy, the trainings sought to build support for the US government’s foreign policy in the Middle East (Sukarieh & Tannock 2010). Langevin (2010) provides a favourable perspective on the bilateral international activities of the AFT in the early 21st Century. He notes its support for campaigns by South African teacher unions against HIV/AIDS, and material assistance to unions in a number of developing countries. The NEA’s international activities are conducted within its affiliation to Education International (Langevin 2010).

unions from the Global North and South to pursue new relationships (Kay 2005, 2015). The Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education was initially formed as a network of unions and student groups concerned about the implications of NAFTA for education. Government proposals to standardize curriculum and teacher certification across the continent were shelved soon after ratification. However, according to Arriaga Lemus (1999) chapters of NAFTA that define the rights of foreign investors led to the re-articulation of government mandates for post-secondary education in Mexico and Canada (overwhelmingly within the public sector, unlike in the US) to facilitate opportunities for private investment. An initial conference titled ‘The Future of Public Education in North America’ was hosted by the labor studies department at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington in January 1993, with participation from education activists, teacher unionists and academics from Canada, the US and Mexico. In February 1995, a second conference was convened in Mexico City to form the Trinational Coalition. The founding organizations were the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) from Canada, the Washington State section of the National Education Association from the US, and sections of the dissident democratic National Coordination of Education Workers (la CNTE) within the official Mexican teachers’ union (el SNTE) from the states of Michoacán and Mexico City, as well as the Polytechnical University (IPN) and the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) (Arriaga Lemus 1999).

The Trinational quickly broadened its mandate to provide support from Canadian and US teachers’ unions to Mexican teachers’ groups experiencing state repression, and of generating and diffusing a shared continental analysis of the neoliberalization of public education among activists and union leaders. This has been done through public campaigns to pressure the

Mexican government when it imprisons or otherwise represses dissident teacher and student organizations, financial support, and the publication of analytical articles. Biennial conferences rotate between Canada, the US and Mexico and organized sessions at large international union events like the biennial Labor Notes conference¹⁰ help cement cross border interpersonal relationships while participating in discussions on shared issues (Roman & Arregui 2015; Arriaga Lemus 2017). By the mid 2000s, the initial focus on NAFTA had been eclipsed by recognition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) increasing influence in global education policy, particularly through its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) standardized test (Personal notes).

The standardized testing of K-12 students, and sometimes their teachers, became a predominant policy directive of governments across North America and beyond in the 1990s. Implementation was driven by an underlying belief that the 'quality' of education was in crisis. This belief mobilized a sequence of nested assumptions that has constructed public consent to the 'Global Education Reform Movement' (Ravitch 2013). Conveniently for austerity-minded neoliberal governments, the solution was not higher funding (as identified by more progressive governments in the 1960s), but greater 'accountability' from teachers and education workers, who it was implied could not be relied on to professionally self-regulate. Under pressure from the US, the OECD launched the PISA in 2000 to allow comparative quantitative analysis of scores between countries (Sellar & Lingard 2014). By the mid 2000s, the US (through No Child Left Behind legislation), Mexico (through the ENLACE exam of secondary school students), and

¹⁰ This US-based conference hosted by the independent publication, Labor Notes, draws two to three thousand union members and activists across sectors and industries to attend workshop sessions and plenaries on topics ranging from engaging new members to building community support for a strike. The author has attended on various occasions.

every Canadian province, had implemented a form of standardized testing of students, purporting to provide an external, objective assessment of the education system (Aboites 2012). By 2015, 72 countries were participating in the triennial PISA test. In explaining the global rise of standardized testing, Addey and Sellar (2017) emphasize the importance of national political contexts, particularly the usage by governments, political parties, media and think tanks, of data from a respected multilateral agency (the OECD) to either endorse existing education policies or vilify them to create a rationale for change. The proliferation of standardized testing has led to a ‘datafication’ of teaching (Stevenson 2017). At the expense of professional autonomy (Bocking 2017), teachers’ work has been increasingly subordinated to meeting quantitative external metrics, passed down from governments for enforcement by school boards and principals.

Following unsuccessful attempts from 2006 to 2012 to use the ENLACE student exam to determine the employment conditions of their teachers¹¹, Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012 to 2018) amended the national constitution at the start of his term to make teachers’ employment conditional on passing a standardized exam every three years. His government also eliminated the prerequisite of a degree in education for employment, substituting it with a standardized exam (Aboites 2015). In promoting his education agenda to the public, Peña Nieto drew on high profile endorsements from the OECD, whose general secretary was also a veteran politician of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Hernandez Navarro 2013). It was endorsed by the SNTE, but fiercely resisted by its internal dissident movement, the CNTE,

¹¹ As Aboites (2012) explains, this national test was used to calculate the job security and salary of teachers, in a similar format to contemporary ‘high stakes’ tests in the US mandated under ‘No Child Left Behind’ legislation in 2001 under President Bush, and the ‘Race to the Top’ program in 2009 of President Obama. It was rendered inoperable by mass protests of dissident teachers’ groups, and the inability of authorities to prevent individual acts of sabotage.

through waves of strikes and civil disobedience reaching nearly all states of Mexico in 2013 and 2016. The Trinational organized collective solidarity statements and delegations from OSSTF, BCTF and the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) to meet with Mexican officials and media, in response to the arrest of CNTE leaders and members during strikes and demonstrations (Arriaga Lemus 2017). Due in part to efforts of the Trinational and its supporters to raise awareness of these struggles and despite the virtual silence of the SNTE, the American Federation of Teachers, Education International and many local unions issued statements of concern following the killing by Mexican police of 11 teacher supporters during a protest in Oaxaca, in June 2016. Later that summer, under pressure from continuing teacher mobilization and widespread scrutiny after the violent incidents, the government began to unravel the punitive evaluation system (Bocking 2018), which was further dismantled by the subsequent Morena party government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2019 (Bocking 2019). Mexican leaders of the Trinational believe that insofar that this activity produces the perception of international scrutiny for the Mexican government, that this has restrained the latter's willingness to resort to violent repression in addressing the teachers' movement (Arriaga Lemus 2017).¹²

The Politics of Teacher Internationalism

Despite the end of the Cold War, the politics of teacher internationalism remain highly fraught, shaped by the national and regional political contexts in which participating unions are

¹² At a smaller scale, a Mexican professor active in the Trinational Coalition credits letters sent by the BCTF and the US section of the Trinational to the president of her university with preventing her from being firing in retaliation for supporting a student strike in 2014. By the professor's account, the surprise of receiving a letter from foreign organizations, simultaneously published in a major Mexico City newspaper, pushed the university president to meet with her (Trejo 2018).

situated, and the often opaque decision-making structures of their respective leaderships. These internal dynamics have weighed considerably on the external activities of their unions. The Trinational has depended institutionally on its co-founding organizations the BCTF, OSSTF, sections of the CNTE, and later the CTU. Many other unions have participated in conferences, solidarity delegations and as co-signatories on official statements, but the Trinational has never received the formal support or participation of the principal national teachers' organizations, the AFT or NEA of the US, the SNTE of Mexico or the CTF of Canada. The Trinational has remained on the margins of the space of teacher internationalism most prominently occupied by Education International, within which these unions engage.

The participation of OSSTF and the BCTF in the Trinational is arguably the international activity that is the furthest outside the mainstream of Canadian teachers' unions. Participation in the Trinational is primarily political in nature, rather than oriented around the charity-based development work that typifies the CTF's international activities. For both unions, their participation coincided with departures from the CTF in the early 2000s¹³, creating an interest among leaders and activists in the development of independent international programs, an activity to which these unions had usually deferred to the CTF. Support in the 1980s from both unions for the anti-Apartheid movement, and a subsequent relationship with the South African Democratic Teachers Union, established a precedent for independent international activity. This was followed in the 1990s and early 2000s by collaboration with the Cuban Ministry of Education on curricular development and the establishment of a union training centre with

¹³ Both had re-affiliated to the CTF by 2018.

Bolivian teachers' unions. Both activities were conducted jointly by the BCTF, OSSTF, and the Union Confederation of Quebec¹⁴ (Kuehn 2006; Bellissimo 2017).

While these Canadian unions are still well within the mainstream of their national labor movement, in the cases of the US and Mexico the Trinational brings together left-led and dissident local unions and movements. Since 2010, the CTU has been the most important US participant. While an affiliate of the AFT, the stridently anti-neoliberal orientation of the CTU's leadership and activist members, and the union's prioritization of grassroots community alliances carry an implicit critique of the national union (Brogan 2014). Various local and state-level unions from California have also participated, particularly the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). Alongside progressive leadership and strong rank and file movements, the CTU and UTLA have in common being situated in US cities with among the largest Latino populations, leading many members to have a personal interest in Mexican politics. Yet since the beginning of the Trinational, institutional support has been the weakest from the US (Arriaga Lemus 1999).

Mexico's SNTE, which includes 1.6 million primary and secondary teachers, support staff and some university faculty, is bitterly divided between its official national leadership, to which most state locals are aligned, and the dissident CNTE. La CNTE, known as the democratic teachers' movement, formed in 1979 to challenge the SNTE leadership's subordination to the government and its longtime ruling party, the PRI, which had led to declining salaries and working conditions (Cook 1996; Foweraker 1993). Union locals in Chiapas and Oaxaca are affiliated with the CNTE, while the movement has majority support and formal state recognition

¹⁴ These activities were supported between 1995 and 2012 by grants from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), with OSSTF receiving approximately \$35 000 a year for its projects. Funding was canceled when CIDA was reorganized to prioritize support for projects aligned with Canadian corporate investment abroad (Bellissimo 2017).

in several other states, and a significant minority of supporters in about a dozen others (Aboites 2015; Arriaga Lemus 2015; Personal Notes). The CNTE —through the affiliation of both its national executive and the direct participation of state-level locals— is arguably the most significant institutional component of the Mexican Section of the Trinational Coalition. Michoacán and Oaxaca have been the most consistently active states, sending delegates to conferences, hosting conferences in 1995 and 2006 respectively, and regularly signing international statements of solidarity issued by the Trinational (Arriaga Lemus 2015). These states are also arguably the most active and institutionally well-resourced locals of the CNTE. They have also been rivals, drawing smaller state locals behind them in internal feuds over strategy, at times undermining the CNTE’s national-level unity (Hernandez Navarro 2012; Bocking 2017). This rivalry has for the most part not been evident within the Trinational.

Through its activity generating international awareness and support for the struggles of Mexican teachers, the Trinational has acted as a de-facto international relations branch of the CNTE in relation to Canadian and US unions. This role is especially significant in the context of the rapid improvement of relations between the SNTE and the AFT following the succession of SNTE leader Juan Diaz de la Torre, after former longtime leader Elba Esther Gordillo was arrested for embezzlement of union funds in 2013 (Bensusan & Middlebrook 2013). Under de la Torre between 2013 and 2018, a period coinciding with Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto’s above mentioned contentious education policies, the SNTE leadership prioritized strong international relations, particularly with Education International, UNESCO and the OECD, despite the latter’s role in advocating for neoliberal reforms in Mexico. These relationships, symbolized by photos of de la Torre embracing foreign leaders at international conferences, were

heavily promoted in the union's internal publications (SNTE 2014; SNTE 2016a; SNTE 2016b). The SNTE's alliances, particularly with Education International, potentially creates an obstacle for local AFT union participation in the Trinational Coalition. The AFT, which contributes the largest share of Education International's funding (along with the NEA), continues to also be well represented within its leadership and policymaking (Weiner 2012; Langevin 2010).¹⁵ Mexico's representation at Education International was completely controlled by the official de la Torre aligned leadership of the SNTE, excluding the CNTE (Personal notes). While the CTF has declined to participate directly in the Trinational, as have several of its provincial affiliates, it cannot necessarily be inferred that this is due to pressure from Education International. Neither the BCTF or OSSTF have experienced political interventions from the CTF or Education International intended to deter their involvement in the Trinational (Kuehn 2018; Bellissimo 2019). Nevertheless, while Education International and the AFT have opposed extreme cases of state violence suffered by Mexico's dissident teachers' movement, they provided external legitimacy to the contested official SNTE leadership which did not resist and often supported government policies that these foreign organizations have themselves recognized as harmful to public education and the teaching profession.

Cross Border Networks, Teacher Insurgencies and Broader Horizons of Understanding

Beyond raising the international profile of the Mexican teachers' movement, and helping increase the political price for state repression, the cross border networks developed during

¹⁵ When an OSSTF delegation to the AFT questioned why the latter had not attended the most recent Trinational Conference in 2018, the AFT International Director responded that it had not been invited (Personal notes). According to Kuehn (2006) and Arriaga Lemus (2017), the AFT has declined to attend or not responded to invitations, since sending an observer in 1995.

Trinational conferences has also influenced contemporary radical movements within US teacher unions. Chicago teacher Jackson Potter attributed inspiration to help co-found the Caucus of Rank and File Educators, which is animated by deep rank and file teacher organization and strong alliances with parent and community groups (Ashby & Bruno 2016), to attendance at meetings of the Trinational. At the 2006 conference in Oaxaca, Mexico¹⁶, Potter met a teacher from Los Angeles, Alex Caputo-Pearl¹⁷, who was helping build a grassroots movement within his local union, and BCTF president Jinny Sims. Sims explained how a year earlier her union conducted an illegal province-wide strike that had won public support and mitigated the government's pro-privatization agenda (McAlevy 2016). These relationships, and the ensuing exchange of ideas, were further cultivated at the next Trinational conference in 2008, hosted by Caputo-Pearl's group in Los Angeles. Sims later visited the Chicago Caucus and provided an example of an established union that functioned differently from the more conservative mainstream within the AFT and the NEA (Potter 2018). The election of Caucus members to the CTU leadership in 2010, and the high profile successful strike of 2012, inspired the emergence of similar groups across the US, some of which have succeeded in revitalizing their unions (Weiner 2012; Bocking 2017). CTU members at the 2018 Labor Notes conference invited participants

¹⁶ A month later, the Oaxacan local of the CNTE launched a strike which became a statewide popular uprising, after the governor sent police to violently attack a protest camp. A wide array of community groups and local residents mobilized in support of the teachers by barricading government buildings, occupying radio stations to share their message, and evicting police and state authorities from cities and towns (Denham & CASA Collective 2008).

¹⁷ Caputo-Pearl was elected president of the United Teachers Los Angeles in 2014. In January 2019, his union conducted a week-long strike along similar lines as the Chicago strike in 2012, demanding the improvement of public services, and also winning broad support. The LA strike has been situated within a trajectory of teacher union activism, arguably beginning with the Chicago strike, that has shifted public discourse within the US away from a consensus accepting privatization and the disciplining of teachers, and the elevation of sentiment demanding a reinvestment in public education and support for teachers (Goldstein 2019).

from the 2018 ‘RedforEd’ teachers’ strikes across the southern US, to attend the next Trinational conference that fall. Vanessa Arredondo-Aguirre, a core organizer of Arizona Educators United (Blanc 2019) attended the Trinational. Herself very new to teacher organizing, she was inspired by examples of grassroots teacher unionism elsewhere in the US and from Mexico, describing both conferences as “really eye opening”, and of having advanced her politicization (Arredondo-Aguirre 2018).

The Trinational Coalition has produced a recognition by teacher unions from the Global North, including OSSTF, BCTF and the CTU, of the value of engaging with unions and movements from the South, as a form of mutual aid in the context of the globalization of neoliberal education policy (Bellissimo 2019). Activists with the Trinational have striven to put forward analyses that frame initiatives like standardized testing, merit pay, the downgrading of professional credentials, the centralization of education governance or the shifting of school principals into managerial roles, within a North American and a global context (Bocking 2017). Along the way, there has been increased recognition within OSSTF, BCTF, and Mexico’s teachers’ movement, of the role of the OECD for defining the mainstream terms of education discourse that are adopted by governments (Bellissimo 2019; Kuehn 2018; Melchor 2018). As Bellissimo (2019) explains:

[E]xperience[s] that many of our colleagues have had either in Mexico or parts of the US has always proved to us a bit of a warning sign of the same corporations, the same privatizers and the same agenda that is fuelled often by the World Bank and others. We are not immune in Canada. We are particularly not immune in Ontario. The reason that is really important is that that demonstrates to educators how important cross border solidarity is. It is not about educators in the global north being the experts while others in the global south have nothing to contribute... In fact, it is the opposite. We have far more to learn from those who have stronger political orientations attacking these kinds of privatization schemes... For us, that has been our biggest strength in belonging.

In part through participation in the Trinational with Mexican unionists who have commonly used the term ‘neoliberalism’ to frame the contemporary political and economic context since the 1990s, this term has slowly emerged in recent years within OSSTF’s institutional discourse. This ‘frame’ has helped both historicize the actions of provincial governments, and contextualize them beyond the parochialisms of Ontario into global processes that make a multi scalar approach through international alliances appear more relevant (Bellissimo 2019; Maria Antentas 2015; Personal notes).

Mexican members of the Trinational have demonstrated solidarity with OSSTF and the BCTF. A leader of a Mexican academic union active in the Trinational was surprised to learn that Canada and the US have public education systems as well as active unions, and that despite being “First World countries”, that they shared some commonalities with Mexico (Trejo 2018). Statements of support and rallies by the Trinational at the Canadian embassy and consulates (Arriaga Lemus 1999; Arriaga Lemus 2017; Trejo 2018), when widely publicized among OSSTF and BCTF members, has boosted their morale in times of struggle (Kuehn 2018).¹⁸ On the first day of a week long strike by Los Angeles teachers in January 2019, two representatives of the Trinational, one from the BCTF, the other a CNTE leader from the state of Veracruz in Mexico, arrived and delivered messages of solidarity to the strikers (Arriaga Lemus 2019).¹⁹ As Featherstone (2012) contends, it is through these types of actions that a passive shared identity is

¹⁸ These solidarity actions were organized by Mexican members of the Trinational in conjunction with two week long unsanctioned strikes by Ontario teachers in 1997 and British Columbia teachers in 2005, against government attacks on their labor rights.

¹⁹ Common membership in the Trinational was a reason given by OSSTF provincial leaders to local union officers for sending messages of solidarity to striking Los Angeles teachers in 2019 (Personal notes).

made meaningful and the basis is provided for a form of internationalism. In reference to public sector unions in the US, Langevin (2010) proposes that joint participation in international campaigns also carries the potential benefit of strengthening cooperation among unions within the same country. The responsibility of provincial governments for education in Canada has tended to curtail inter-provincial coordination among teachers' unions, as seen in the limited capacity of the CTF. Acting together as the two primary Canadian participants in the Trinational has considerably strengthened relations between OSSTF and the BCTF (Personal notes)²⁰.

The Limits and Challenges of Teacher Internationalism

Labor internationalism faces the challenge identified by geographer Doreen Massey (2007) confronting social movements functioning internationally or globally, of its power usually deriving from its highly place-specific embedded nature. This is particularly the case for public sector workers, whose employers are defined at the local, state/provincial or national scale. Teachers' work is socially embedded within local relationships with the parents of their students (Bocking 2018), and sometimes within the broader community. For the foreseeable future, the primary adversary of teachers' unions will be the governments of their respective states. While they may implement the advice of the OECD or the World Bank, it is the choice of these governments to do so (Bocking 2015; Addey & Sellar 2017). Whereas global federations representing national unions in manufacturing and logistics sectors endeavour to negotiate framework agreements with multinational employers, the 'sliding scales of spaces' (Maria

²⁰ Congratulatory letters from the BCTF and the Quebec Union Confederation to OSSTF, celebrating the latter's centenary in 2019, prominently referenced joint international solidarity work.

Antentas 2015) for teachers are different. A parallel scale of organization does not exist in public education. As with most groups of workers, the peak scale continues to be at the 'national' level (Cumbers 2004). While OSSTF and other unions of the Global North have the additional capacity to provide financial assistance, the practical forms for mutual cross border support remain limited.

To disrupt the legacy of labor imperialism, Scipes (2014) and Waterman (1998) emphasize that movements from the Global South should not be subordinated to organizations of the North in the elaboration of cross border strategy and priorities, and that these networks must also be explicitly informed by anti-racism. Early participants in the Trinational found that difficulties faced by the network were often of a logistical nature, including effective English-Spanish translation and securing visas for Mexican delegates to travel to the US and Canada (Melchor 2018; Trejo 2018; Kuehn 2018). At a larger structural level, an obvious obstacle is that while Canadian and US unions can afford to send delegates, with budget lines allocated for this purpose, this is usually not the case for Mexican organizations, whose attendance in Canada or the US depend on financial support to at least cover airfares. While BCTF and OSSTF have provided this support, it is then incumbent for the network to ensure that this does not lead to power inequities, as with the Cold War era international organizations dominated by the NEA and the AFT. To a great extent, this has generally been avoided by the Mexican section having taken the most initiative and leadership in the Trinational's activities, from planning conferences to issuing statements and sending solidarity delegations.

As a relatively informal network with access to minimal institutional resources, the Trinational has depended on key individuals and personal networks for its sustainability. The

earliest meetings to discuss the implications of NAFTA were convened not by unions or organizations but by academics from Washington State, Dan Leahy; and Mexico City, Maria de la Luz Arriaga Lemus; and a leader of the BCTF, Larry Kuehn (Kuehn 2006; Arriaga Lemus 2017). While Leahy has retired, Arriaga, Kuehn and a handful of others have remained vital to the Trinational's continuity.²¹ Such commitment is not accidental. Many trade unionists, activists and academics who engage in broader education politics are driven primarily by a concern for the immediate issues that define the contexts where they live and work. They also generally hold implicit social democratic political views. While also being grounded in specific social and institutional contexts, it is noteworthy the degree to which key individuals within the Trinational have personal histories of idealistic commitment to a socialist left, which perhaps has helped sustain their persistent enthusiasm for internationalism.

While functional, this structure makes its sustainability dependent on the continued participation of key individuals whose institutional knowledge is difficult to replace. As a full time staff representative of OSSTF and its principal liaison with the Trinational, Bellissimo (2019) described his role as broadening awareness and support among the union's central staff and elected officers to ensure OSSTF remains a substantive institutional participant. As Bellissimo explains, "The commitment organizations make to each other cross borders can't just be based on friendships... because often what happens is we bypass the fact we are not representing our organization or that our organizations aren't signing on the dotted

²¹ Arriaga remains the coordinator of the Mexican section of the Trinational, the most active 'national' section of the Coalition, including state locals of the CNTE and post secondary unions, as well as more informal groups of academics and university students. Kuehn is the primary representative of the BCTF, the Trinational's most significant institutional supporter, followed by Bellissimo on behalf of OSSTF since 1997 (Bellissimo 2019; Personal notes).

line.” (Bellissimo 2019). He further explains both the institutional and the broader political importance of introducing more union leaders to the Trinational:

[W]henever we have new people come with us, and return from a Trinational, I have never heard anyone say what a waste of time that was... They may not be sure on our way down. They might be treating it as an exotic trip because they have never been to this part of the world before. But every time they come back, they find something that touched them. The fact they saw a human face. They saw another educator whose working conditions are so poorly paid and disrespected in comparison to ours, we are so fortunate, that when they come back they find they are a new ally. Not necessarily on the front lines of volunteering for everything, but another ally who would allow us to continue to do the work. (Bellissimo 2019)

Other unions have different models of international representation. Alongside elected leaders and full time staff, the BCTF and the CTU each send several rank and file members chosen through an application. This process requires an explicit commitment to continue international solidarity work, through writing for their local union newsletter, speaking at member meetings or participating on an international committee (BCTF 2018; CTU 2018; Kuehn 2018). A similar model is followed for the composition of the collective Mexican delegation to conferences in the US and Canada (Trejo 2018; Arriaga Lemus 2017). It is these activists within the Trinational’s constituent organizations of all three countries, who have striven to convince skeptical colleagues focused on impending negotiations or strikes in relation to their respective governments, of the value and importance of the less tangible international dimension.

Participants from Canada, the US and Mexico noted that the local, state/provincial or national scales of state activity that structure public education and thereby teachers’ unions, make sustaining institutional or individual commitments to shared cross border projects difficult, particularly after the enthusiasm generated by an international conference has dissipated (Kuehn 2018; Bellissimo 2019; Potter 2018; Melchor 2018). This breakdown of continuity contributes to

what a CNTE representative identified as a challenge of avoiding excessive amounts of time during conferences rehashing earlier debates on strategy or policy. He suggested it should be easier to reference past deliberations, to facilitate moving more rapidly to developing concrete proposals for action, another widely identified challenge (Bellissimo 2019; Melchor 2018; Potter 2018).

While some discussion has occurred at Trinational Conferences of shared cross border demands and bargaining proposals to governments (Potter 2018), Bellissimo (2019) cautioned that the wide variation of conditions between and even within countries, makes broader principles more realistic:

We all want fair taxation. We all want increases in spending for public education. We all want zero or less dollars going to private portions of the education system in each of our countries. We start from very, very different places, but we can still have some similar principles that would guide collective bargaining. It doesn't mean I am bargaining in the same language as the Chicago teachers or the LA teachers because our circumstances are so different.

Bellissimo (2019) and Potter (2018) added that an OSSTF report at the 2018 conference on how the union had successfully negotiated protections for school district support staff from outsourcing to external agencies led CTU delegates to request this contract language from OSSTF, as this was a shared concern for their union. These Canadian and US participants also expressed an interest in adapting Indigenous curriculum materials produced by the Michoacán local of the CNTE. This is particularly the case for the CTU, whose members teach thousands of Mexican-American students, many of whom are also Indigenous (Potter 2018; Bellissimo 2019). In turn, the CNTE of Michoacán and Mexican academics in the Trinational are interested in helping develop continent-wide critical pedagogy (Melchor 2018; Trejo 2018).

The Trinational has thus moved beyond common declarations against the neoliberalization of education. Without reaching a level of binding coordination in which participating organizations would sacrifice autonomy, the Trinational has obtained a degree of organization in which it is possible to share proposals and policies of a sufficiently specific nature that they are likely to be adopted by others, tailored to their specific local conditions.

Conclusion

The Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education has made an important contribution to labor internationalism and solidarity in the 21st Century. It has done so by being among the earliest groups to articulate and disseminate widely among North American teachers' organizations, an analysis of the neoliberalization of education. In part through convening face to face meetings of union leaders, grassroots organizers and academics, the network has situated specific local, regional and national struggles within a larger context. For participants, this has facilitated a more strategic approach beyond the 'eternal present' of reacting to the latest budget cuts or threats to professionalism by governments. It also encourages seeing "far away others" across borders as potential allies. The co-signed public statements and international delegations employed by the Trinational are well-worn tactics within labor internationalism. However it is believed that the scrutiny generated by such actions has helped restrain the repressive capacities of the Mexican state, giving more freedom to maneuver for teachers' movements here. While the highly socially embedded nature of teachers' work remains in tension with the construction of transnational networks, the Trinational has been a space that has encouraged discussion and tentative efforts towards greater cooperation. It continues to work through its internal structures,

but with a focus on maintaining horizontal North-South relationships, and Mexican participants taking particular initiative, the Trinational has been successful in overcoming the Cold War era legacy, and has contributed to a new teacher internationalism.

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